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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the effects of stress on children and considers ways in which teachers can help them cope. Three major sources of stress are identified: (1) normal developmental stress, such as pressure for academic success; (2) endemic social stress, resulting from such social trends as rising divorce rates and the general erosion of the family; and (3) stressful life events, including family moves and learning problems in school. The effects of parents' responses to the increased instability in children's lives are weighed, particularly parental ambivalence and tentativeness toward their children. Teachers are advised to create low-stress environments in their classrooms and to impose order, structure, and predictability in the class routine. Teachers also need to help children come to terms with academic demands and the stress associated with them. (CL)

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Childhood Stress: The Teacher's Role

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Childhood Stress: The Teacher's Role

Abstract

This paper describes childhood stress and gives some suggestions for teachers in helping children to cope. Three major sources of stress are identified: (1) normal developmental stress; (2) endemic social stress; and (3) stressful life events. Each is discussed with major emphasis on those environmental stressors which have an impact on the family placing today's children under considerable stress. Finally, the teacher's role as a significant adult who can mediate the impact of stress on children, is explored and the implications for child behavior management are discussed.

Childhood Stress: The Teacher's Role

Louis A. Chandler, Ph.D.

Increasing numbers of children are being referred for psychological and educational help because they are not functioning very effectively in school. These children seem unable to meet the demands of school. They don't attend well. They can't concentrate and marshall their resources for the sort of sustained effort that learning requires. These school functioning problems may first become manifested in reading, in which case the child is said to have a "reading problem"; or they may show up in math, leading to remedial efforts in that area.

Because of the obvious educational manifestations of the problem, these children often find themselves in various special education programs. They swell the ranks of remedial reading programs, Title I programs, etc. Yet their school performance remains, for the most part, marginal; grades barely passing; occasionally failing.

In their early school years they are prime candidates for retention, usually for "immaturity." Later as they pass through school, their frustration builds and they begin to show behavior problems. Some get into trouble with teachers and classmates. Others assume the role of the class clown, or they may retire into social isolation, withdrawn, and no longer willing to actively particpate in a process that has only negative consequences for them. In short, the

ways they try to cope with their school functioning problems are not very effective, and are actually counterproductive since they create further problems for the children, thus trapping them in a vicious circle. Their behavior becomes more extreme, interfering with learning, and the resulting learning problems impel them to adopt even more extreme behavior in a vain effort to cope. And so the cycle continues.

It should be pointed out that the problem here is not a lack of innate ability. These children are not "Learning Disabled", nor are they "Emotionally Disturbed" in the traditional usage of those educational terms. Yet they are likely to be referred for special education placement.

If our traditional categories don't help us to understand these children, how then should we characterize them? We can get a clue by examining their behavior more closely. What we find is that their behavior has a certain "driven" quality, as if they are responding to some unseen force or stimulus outside of their control. We might conceptualize this unseen force as a stress, leading us to adopt a pespective on these children -- seeing them as children under stress. This is a perspective with profound implications for assessment, understanding, and helping these children (Chandler, 1985a; 1985b).

The Coping Efforts of Adults and Children

A useful way to approach the child's experience with stress is to

contrast it with the strategies adults tend to adopt in their efforts to cope. While there are a number of ways of responding to stress open to adults, the options available to children are much more restricted. They are of course, naturally limited by the level of cognitive and language development. With fewer life experiences to draw upon, their repetoire of coping behaviors is more limited.

Optimally, adults can use logical reasoning to provide justification for the tradeoffs, compromises, and balances that are an inevitable part of life. Thus a potentially unpleasent visit to the dentist is seen as necessary to assure better dental health.

But adults are also capable of increased tolerence to stress over time because their reasoning allows them to see the long-term payoffs. A college student may have to endure a share of boring, difficult, or unpleasent hours in the classroom in order to obtain a coveted degree. Even though graduation may be several years away, he is willing to work for that goal. For the child on the other hand, the time between the behavior and the reward must be shortened considerably if the reinforcement is to have the desired effect. Children have limited tolerence to delay of gratification. Thus in the first instance, developmental factors restrict the options open to children.

Added to these developmental limitations are other realistic restraints, e.g, lack of mobility, financial and personal dependence on parents. An adult who finds himself in a stressful job may seek to modify his duties, arrange a transfer, relocate, change jobs, or

ultimately resign. A child who experiences the second grade classroom as a stressful situation has few option. Certainly a formal resignation is not one of them, although the effect may be the same.

Finally, reducing stress by retreating from, or consciously avoiding potentially stressful situations is a well-practiced adult ploy. But this too requires a degree of independence, planning, and mobility, usually beyond the capabilities of children.

With these restrictions on their responses, it is not surprising that children tend to respond behaviorally, and with an immediacy to stress, often in ways that seem to the onlooking adult, irrational.

Sources of Childhood Stress

Stress may be defined as a state of emotional tension arising from unmet needs or environmental threats. There are three major sources of childhood stress: (1) normal developmental stress; (2) endemic social stress; and (3) specific stressors. A few examples of each might be helpful.

Normal developmental stress. A certain amount of stress is present in all change, and since growth and development is a process of change, stress is an inherent part of human development.

This normal stress is particularly evident in the developmental tasks expected of children as they are required to meet ever-increasing reality demands. The first day of school nicely illustrates the multiplicity of stressors placed on children in the normal scheme of things.

On the first day of school the child's world expands dramatically, literally overnight. There are new adults to please, new children to come to terms with, and a new environment to explore. Teachers and parents suddenly expect the child to acquire knowledge, master new skills, and show increasing control over their emotions and behavior. The adult analogy is of a person who has to move to strange new city, meet a new group of people, make new friends, and adequately perform in a new job requiring new skills; and do all of this overnight. Of course all children face this stress; some cope adequately, some do not.

As the child enters the school experience, academic competency gathers increasing importance as a potential source of stress. At issue here is the child's understanding of what it means to be competent.

Children tend to equate academic competence with self competenece, and their developing self image may become increasingly tied to their sense of how well they're doing academically, especially if that value has been transmitted to them by their parents. This can be particulary stressful for the child who, for any number of reasons, may be having learning problems in school. For that child failure in school can be equated with failure as a person, calling into question his image of himself as the "good" child, one that is worthy of parental love. Such a child fears that he will loose the love of the parents. He worries that he may be punished for being bad by the parent's witholding their love. He questions whether parental love is

contingent on good academic performance. These concerns, arising out of meeting reality tasks in the normal process of education, can be especially stressful for children.

Endemic Social Stress.

One of the major sources of psychosocial stress on today's children lies in rapid social change, and particularly its effect on the family. We have seen a host of changes with profound implications for children: the changing roles of women, a questioning of sexual idenitity, the erosion of the family, and changes in the roles and attitudes of parents towards child-raising. The implications are poorly-understood, but the linkage between these social trends and children's lives is becomming more clear.

Beginning in the 1960s we entered a era of rapid social change. Sometimes called the "me decade", those years ushered in the human potential movement with such accompanying myths as the self-fulfillment myth and the superwoman myth, to name just a few. The results were sweeping changes in social behavior and customs. We saw a rise in divorce rates, alternate living arrangments, unwed motherhood, changing employment patterns for women, job dissatisfaction and job displacement, family moves and relocations, and the general erosion of the family. These changes place the notion of the family under considerable stress and thus introduce instablity into the child's world.

Some idea of the scope of the problem can be seen in the divorce

rates. There are estimates that between 40 to 50% of today's children will spend some portion of their growing years in a single-parent family. But these statistics are deceptive since the problem is more widespread. Unmarried people are more likely to live together, and unmarried women more likely to have children than was the case in recent history. The result is more casual relationships, relationships which have the fragile quality of a temporary arrangement, easily entered into, and easily dissolved. These qualities make them appealing to adults and potentially devastating for children.

Teachers are seeing more of the children of such partnerships in their classrooms today as increasing numbers enter our schools from homes that are unstable, disruptive, and occasionally chaotic. Such children have been exposed to various arrangements of significant adults who once would have assumed the crucial roles of mother and father. Confused, uncertain, insecure and feeling inadequate, these children are not prepared to meet the demands of school.

How do Parents Respond to the Increased Instability in Children's Lives?

The archtypal roles of parents are to nurture and protect the young. What happens when parents and teachers (who are often surrogate parents) abdicate because they no longer wish to take on that traditional role?

This abdication, or at least a reluctance to enter into the role of

parent, even when the biological reality of parenthood may be a fact, is more common today because of the ambivalence adults feel towards children.

Even in the best of circumtances there is some ambivalence towards children. They call for sacrafice (particularly on the mother's part), the postponing of personal goals and interests, restrictions on personal freedom, and a considerable financial outlay. Luckily there are strong innate tendencies towards love and protection of the young which counterbalance these feelings and usually win out in the end, so that the child is assured of a reasonable measure of parental love and acceptence.

However, when social trends exacerbate these naturally ambivalent feelings, parents may be driven to extreme measures in an effort to meet conflicting needs. While some parents can successfully resolve this conflict, others adopt extreme ways of handling it.

For example, some parents remain tenative about making the committment to parenthood. Lacking a total committment, they hold back, and this reticence is interpreted by the child as a deprivation of love. A variation is seen with parents who alternately give and withold love, in response to their own conflicting needs. The childen of such parents react to what they perceive as a deprivation of parental love, and they are likely to show extreme behavior in their efforts to cope with the perceived stress inherent in this situation. Such children are particularly vulnerable to later stressors because, as Gardner (1972) has correctly pointed out, the deprivation of

parental love is a key factor in the etiology of many emotional problems.

A different approach is taken by those parents who, in order to meet personal needs, find it convenient to foster a pseudo-maturity in children, most often under the guise of encouraging independence. The children of such parents are deprived of childhood. Not allowed to be children they are forced to face an adult reality for which they are not emotionally prepared. Several writers have documented this alarming trend, with books like "The Hurried Child" (Elkind, 1985), and "The Disappearence of Childhood" (Postman, 1984). [The latter work's an excellent exposition of the historical rise and fall of childhood as we know it.]

Child psychology has taught us that children, especially in their early years, have a crucial need to form loving attachments. When those bonds are disrupted children are likely to show disturbed emotional development. The love bond between parent and child is a necessary prerequisite for the child's mental health and emotional well being.

But what of those children who have experienced only transient, temporary bonds with various parent figures in their lives? What of the children of men and women who, torn between the demands of careers and families, have felt unable to make a total committment? It is likely that such children will fail to develop trust in their relations with others. They will see the world as a selfish place where love is witheld, and committments only tenative. Viewing their

world with suspicion, they will be condemned to repeating a pattern of increasing isolation and selfishness in their own lives.

Stressful Life Events

The third source of childhood stress is located in those events and situations which introduce instability and disruption in the child's world. This category includes not only the more blatant examples of childhood trauma but such everyday occurances as family financial problems, moves and relocations, parental divorce, health problems, and learning problems in school. All of these require some effort to cope on the child's part, and hence are likely to elicit a stress response.

A recent survey (Chandler, Million, & Shermis, 1985) found that these events occur with some frequency in the lives of children, (Table 1). While no baseline data are available for comparative purposes it may be that, at least certain classes of stressful life events are occuring more frequently in the lives of today's children.

Studies of stressful life events with children, and especially those studies which focused on traumatic events, have pointed to the key role adults, and especially parents, can play. Studies of such diverse disasters as the London blitz during World War II (Freud & Burlingham, 1943) and natural disasters like tornados (Silber, Perry & Bloch, 1957) have consistently found that the ability of children to adjust is directly related to their parents' behavior and attitudes during the disaster and afterwards.

	Life Event	Percentage
1.	Mother beginning work	54.7
2.	Birth of brother or sister	50.8
3.	Death of grandparent	44.7
4.	Changed schools	40.0
5.	Severe illness requiring hospitalization of parent	33.4
6.	Loss of job by parent	33.4
7.	Increased arguments with brothers and sisters	28.9
8.	Family moves; relocations	26.2
9.	Vision problem requiring glasses	25.0
10.	Increase in number of arguments between parents	21.3
11.	Marital separation of parents	19.9
12.	Divorce of parents	19.1

Table 1. Common Potentially Stressful Events Found in the Lives of Children (N = 407)

How Teachers Can Help

In some cases stress responses of children become so extreme, so maladptive, that they may have to be referred for professional help (Chandler 1985b). But there are large numbers of children who live under considerable stress, whose behavioral responses don't reach such alarming levels and for whom more general efforts to help can be made. Here the teacher can play a vital role.

In the experience of childhood stress, the adult role is that of a mediator, filtering the experience and cushioning the impact of stress. Adults help children to structure and order their world thus gaining some control over stressful situations. It is in the role of the responsible adult that the teacher can help children to cope.

In their role as mediators, adults provide an environment in which children can experiment, learn, and grow. They can try to insure that this environment is not unduly stressful. Environmental stress in the home and family or in the classrom can be reduced by imposing some order, structure, and predictablity on the environment. Clear adult expectations and effective communication are also helpful. These environmental qualities lessen childish fears, decrease ambiguity, and genrally reduce the sources of stress inherent in day-today living.

Teachers can take a number of specific steps to create a low-stress environment in the classroom (Chandler, 1981). Such a classroom might provide some children with the only stability in their lives. Teachers who accept their roles as responsible adults, who impose

reasonable control and discipline in the classrroom, and who make their expectations for academic performance clear, reduce ambiguity, minimize the opportunities for frustration, and lessen the stress and insecurity in the children in their classroom.

Of particular importance in this setting is coming to terms with academic demands, since this is the central task of the child in school. The stress asociated with it, and the opportunity that it presents to develop effective coping resources may be the single most important concern of the teacher, second only to the teaching mission itself. Other stressors, such as those created by a confusing, chaotic, or fearful environment, may be eased by environmental manipulation on the part of the teacher and school authorities.

Adults in general, and parents and teachers in particular, because of their poweful influences as role models, mediators, and environmental manipulators, can be potent forces for change in children's lives. Adults are invested with magical powers by the very young, and some vestiage of that perception lingers throughout the developmental years (and probably into adulthood). The adult is, for the child, the person in charge, bringing order out of chaos, correctin wrongs, balancing the injustices, and controlling the forces that, if left unchecked, would prove overwhelming to the child. Children therefore tend to see adults as protective and helping. The wise teacher capitalizes on these feelings in helping children to learn to cope.

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